Filipino-American Vocal and Choral Music Performance and Composition
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Moderator: Darleen Principe
Additional Participant: Eleanor Lipat-Chesler (Independent Scholar, Ube Arte)

Transcription

Eleanor [00:00:00]
Hi and thank you for coming. I'm wondering if we can go around and introduce ourselves. Very briefly, I'm Eleanor Lipat- Chesler. I'm with Ube Arte arts and culture research organization and I'm the project manager for this book project.

Darleen [00:00:29]
I'm Darleen Principe and I am a journalist and a lecturer at California State University Northridge in the department of journalism and I am working with Eleanor on this on this great project.

Gelo [00:00:48]
Nilo, would you like to introduce yourself

Nilo [00:00:49]
Okay, hi I'm Nilo Alcala. I'm a composer, born and raised in the Philippines, but now based here in Los Angeles for quite some time. I do a lot of different kinds of music, but I've focused a lot of my energy on choral music. Me and Kuya Gelo who is part of this interaction. Kuya Gelo and I are part of this big family of singers of the Philippine Madrigal Singers. Although, we we didn't really sing together at the same time; the music world is so small. Then going back to my own music, I write a lot of music but focus on choral music that blends my experiences as a Filipino and my interactions with various traditions in the Philippines and I incorporate the Western choral idiom into that. So that's my main thing but I do a lot of other things as well.

Gelo [00:02:00]
My name is Gelo Francisco, I am the artistic director for Philippine Chamber Singers, Los Angeles, a community choir based here in LA, established in 2004. I direct music here in my local parish in Granada Hills. St John Baptist de la Sal. I am also a performer as Nilo said we're jack of all trades. We wear different hats, when we need to as performers, and born and raised in the Philippines, now here in Granada Hills, with my family. Thank you for inviting us.

Darleen [00:02:49]
Thank you. I thank you both for participating in this conversation.

Nilo [00:02:57]
Yes.

Darleen [00:02:57]
So, you know each other.? You knew each other prior?

Nilo [00:03:00]
Yes, definitely

Darleen [00:03:02]
How far back do you go?

Nilo [00:03:03]
Oh, I remember my first tour with…no, my first U.S. tour with the Philippine singers, *he* organized the concerts and he was one of our hosts. I think I lived in your house.

Gelo [00:03:16]
I think so. Back in the Philippines, we are members, we are part of a bigger, like he said a bigger family of choir singers. The UP, University of the Philippines Madrigal singers. What we do, we live out of a suitcase for how many months? Touring around the world. concertizing. Doing concerts all over, participating in these festivals and competitions, choral competitions. We're just one big family. I think alumni are all over the world that whenever the current group tours around the world, we're somehow the Titos and Titas.

Nilo [00:04:12]
Yes.

Gelo [00:04:15]
Alumni become the Titos and the Titas and we try to arrange concerts for the current batch.

Nilo [00:04:25]
And host us as well in their own home.

Darleen [00:04:25]
Wow

Gelo [00:04:26]
We feed them adobo here in America.

Nilo [00:04:29]
Yes

Darleen [00:04:29]
That’s important. Yeah, so you can continue to mentor, that's great. How did each of you before the Philippine Madrigal Singers, how did each of you get into choral music?

Gelo [00:04:45]
Nilo, would you like…

Nilo [00:04:47]
I got into choral music a little bit late. No, that's not true because I joined a choir in my high school, but it wasn't as you know hardcore as what we had in college UP Diliman where the Philippine Madrigal singers are based

Gelo [00:05:15]
(Unclear)

Nilo [00:05:16]
Yes. Before I went to the UP college of music, I studied development communication in UP Los Baños and that's where I joined my first serious choir I would say. The UP LB choral ensemble. That was my introduction into how grand the choral world is because my first international tour was with that group. We went to Spain. We went to Australia, yeah. I was a fan then of the Philippine Madrigal Singers, their batch actually. Everyone was.

Gelo [00:06:01]
Don’t give them my age!

Nilo [00:06:04]
So somehow choristers in the Philippines would start as fans of this, this big name, the Philippine Madrigal Singers and I was one of those. I never really thought I would be part of that. I guess Kuya Gelo has his own story as well, getting acquainted with the Philippine Madrigal Singers.

Gelo [00:06:28]
Actually, it's the same thing with me as a little boy, I grew up in a household of singers. My mom and dad were choir singers already back in the 1950s. Both my mom and my dad were members of the first choral group in Mandaluyong in the Philippines. They're called the Polyphonic Society of Mandaluyong. They have been handled by members of the Philippines Philharmonic Orchestra. Whenever they had concerts, I remember as a boy, they would bring us. We were all bored and we didn't understand why we were there and why they had to bring us. I think subconsciously, as you know, we were growing up…I belong to a household of five siblings. All of us grew up knowing and breathing music and me being the youngest I think it all rubbed off

on me. I remember my first exposure in choir besides, my parents singing in one was watching this TV station [program] called Paco Park Presents. It's a weekly show. It's an open amphitheater where artists perform. Lo and behold, it's a concert of the UP Madrigal singers. I was like ten, thirteen years old. I remember them really well. I remember me and my sister sitting on the floor and watching TV so that no one could change the channel. You had to be near the TV, there's no remote at that time. You just have to flick the dial. We were there for like an hour and it stuck to me. Like Nilo, I never thought of being a member myself. A few years later, I joined this church choir. In the Philippines, every mass has a choir. Every church has a choir at every mass. They're all pro bono, they're all coming from the community and these are different people exposed to choral music.

Gelo [00:09:30]
When I went to college, I took up nursing. Not related at all as. So, go figure. Eventually, something hit and I shifted to music, UP College of Music. I knew that my ____ choir rehearses there and it's a resident choir of the UP College of Music, the UP per se. It's a sacred space if you're not worthy like I felt before. I was not worthy of even going near the rehearsal area but a friend of mine actually wanted to join. He said, one afternoon, "Hey can you accompany me to the rehearsal, the UP Madrigal singers?" I said, "What? Are you crazy?" So, guess what. I became a member and he quit.

Darleen [00:10:43]
Oh wow. What part do you sing?

Gelo [00:10:49]
I sing baritone bass, which is the lower register of the voice. Nilo is a tenor.

Darleen [00:11:03]
The basses are always hard to find.

Gelo [00:11:06]
Oh yes, but the tenors are the rock stars. of the

Nilo [00:10:15]
Tenors only feel that they're rock stars.

Darleen [00:11:20]
How long did you stay? How long did you sing with Philippine Madrigal singers then?

Gelo [00:11:26]
From 1991to1994. Short stint. Yeah

Darleen [00:11:35]
What about you? I know you became their composer in residence but before that?

Nilo [00:11:44]

I started singing with them 2003 and then I left, [in the[middle of 2007 because I had to study here.

Darleen [00:11:52]
Yes, I actually I wanted to ask you, though. You've accomplished so much since then. Winning the American prize and being commissioned by all these amazing groups including the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Can you talk a little bit about your journey, your path from being in the Philippines to here and you know where the music has taken you?

Nilo [00:12:22]
You know, I would say that the things that happened to me are more like divine orchestrations, I guess. Some of the things that happened I did not plan. I did not plan like in a very intentional manner. Some of them are. After studying music in UP Diliman in the Philippines, it was sort of a whim just to apply for a master's here in the US. My teachers were telling me, you know if you want to improve, going outside of the country is also a good idea. My last two semesters I put up applications for different universities. I found this scholarship. I just googled masters with scholarships blah blah blah. I think one of the first few searches, search items, was a scholarship from Billy Joel at Syracuse University. That's like one of the four universities that I applied to and luckily, I got it. So that was two years of studies and interacting with the world, I guess. After that, my initial plan was to go back home, of course and share what I learned. Then I had friends in LA, who told me, hey why not explore and share your Philippine experience here.

Nilo [00:14:20]
Long story short, I became a resident. I stayed here for a while. The opportunities that came were not because I was here, but because of my previous accomplishments back home. When Grant Gershon emailed me, what he said in his email…Grant Gershon, the master chorale artistic director. This was back in 2012, I guess or earlier. "Hi Nilo, I've been enjoying your online music," like in YouTube or SoundCloud. Those were recordings that I had when I was in the Philippines. Pieces of some Madrigal Singers and other choirs' [performances]. I guess the chance of him landing onto my web page or my YouTube page was- I regard this like divine orchestration, I guess.

Nilo [00:15:38]
Although one of the members of the master chorale is Filipino actually. I'm pretty sure he gave my name to him, but then of course, I believe in a higher power that makes things happen. So, opportunities came after that.

Darleen [00:15:58]
Once your name is out there's, it gets a little easier. I imagine. Gelo, I was wondering too with you; I know that the Philippine Chamber Singers Los Angeles, that was 2014 you founded that.

They started mostly as like a caroling group right or just performing at weddings, here and there. How did how did it get to where it is now?

Gelo [00:16:29]
Well, it's actually the same thing [as] with Nilo. Once your name gets out there, it's out there and it's two things. It's either, people would recommend you or people won't. Maybe at that time, I would guess we were at the right times and the right place because although there are a lot of Filipino American groups here in America even before we migrated, I guess we were the only one who existed who lasted the longest. It's hard to maintain that here in America. It's really different when you're in the Philippines. We keep on analyzing, why is it easier to form a group in the Philippines than here? We came up with the answer that I guess it's the distance and it's more convenient. In the Philippines, you just go out, get on a tricycle or a Jeepney and go to wherever your rehearsal is. But here you know you have to have a car, or you have to know the bus routes and the times that it will leave. I guess the accessibility of getting into a group rehearsal would be one,

Nilo [00:18:21]
I agree.

Gelo [00:18:22]
Yeah, right?

Nilo [00:18:26]

Can I add to that Kuya Gelo? Also, one thing that I noticed when you've been born and raised in the Philippines and come here to study, one thing I noticed is that American culture treasures privacy so much. That's what I noticed especially the first few months here. In the Philippines, you can just go out of your house, knock on your neighbor's door and say hi and they will let you in and "Oh, come on, let's eat adobo and let's make music [and] do karaoke." Here you have to make an appointment three weeks at least to do something together in person and that was a culture shock for me. I guess that translates also into forming a group. I mean it's easy to gather your friends in say the same college and [say,] "Oh yeah, let's form a group,"

Gelo [00:19:30]
Or church.

Nilo [00:19:31]
Or church, right? Here us, Filipino Americans have become Americanized also in such a way that we have to observe that social practice as well. It can be both a good thing and a hindrance [in coming] together.

Gelo [00:20:02]

Yeah, right. So, it just started with singing, being invited at the consulate general when I was living in LA and they were looking for carolers. At that time, I was processing my papers because my wife and my son were coming. I was the first one to migrate here and I had to arrange the papers. I got recruited with some of the, the singers, my roommates, who happened to be choral singers too. Next thing we knew we were invited for a wedding. Next thing we knew we were invited for a funeral. We call that KBL singers. Kasal Binyag Libing. Wedding, baptism, and funeral singer[s]. As I've said, I think it's the ability to hold it together and maybe planning too but I think it all boils down to the main purpose. Just to make music together. That held us together because we had the same thinking. We just love to sing.

Darleen [00:21:41]
Do you have the same members? Has it been the same members throughout?

Gelo [00:21:45]

No, but our founding members are still here. Like I said, it's been like birth pains of establishing a group. You just have to find the right people who have the same mentality. People who come in find out that, "Oh my gosh they're too serious about this. I am just here to enjoy." They can't handle it so they leave. Some of them are really serious choral musicians [and] they can't find the substance that they're looking for with this group. So, people come, people go. It's understandable but now I think we found the right rhythm and we still exist.

Darleen [00:22:57]
When you when you started- because now you've performed at the Hollywood Bowl, you've performed at the Walt Disney Music Hall, right? You've performed at all these major major stages- did you envision that? Did you see that when you were first starting the group?

Gelo [00:23:16]
Of course, a performer's dream would to perform, me as a solo performer, I always dreamt of performing in a packed football stadium. That's it. I put it in the back of my mind and lo and behold we were singing at the Dodgers Stadium. I always believe if you put it out there, just keep on thinking it and it'll happen. It'll happen one way or the other. Even if you're seven-nine. It'll happen.

Darleen [00:23:57]
Okay. I wanted to ask you to two, how robust is the choral scene here, the FilAm, the Filipino American choral scene here in California, here in LA? Or even beyond, further out in America? If you know.

Gelo [00:24:19]
Nilo, would you like to answer that?

Nilo [00:24:21]

I was actually going to say you're in a better position because you've held a festival, you were in a festival of choirs involving a lot of…

Gelo [00:24:33]
Yeah, there are a lot because music is really part of the culture, the Filipino culture. It doesn't matter if you grew up, born and raised in the Philippines, or born and raised here. As long as you have the Filipino roots, I think it kind of rubs off [on you] if your parents, even if they're not really singer singers. I think, here in Los Angeles, we have, in every church and I'm not only saying the Catholic church, [all] the churches per se. I think you'll find a group of Filipino American singers there. Or in choir you'll find mostly Filipinos there. As we went around the US, I had the privilege of meeting a lot of people who go to church and serve as music ministers. I think that's the back door of getting into choral music, (is) church choirs because most of them don't hold auditions. It's voluntary and it's just a couple of hours, mostly, a week. It doesn't really ask [that much] of you. It's just that you have to attend reversals and sing on Sundays and then you can go about being a nurse or some other profession. I think it's safe to say that there's a lot of Filipino Americans who are part of choral music and choral groups.

Nilo [00:26:47]
Yes. Also, since a lot of Filipinos have migrated here and many of them are alumni of different groups in the Philippines. They would form alumni groups here like I have friends from UST singers, they have formed their own group here. I have friends from the Adventist University of the Philippines, who also toured internationally. They have a group here. Wherever Filipinos go they will take that with them and then form their own smaller group.

Gelo [00:27:24]
And they become leaders.

Nilo [00:27:26]
Yes, yes. That's true.

Gelo [00:27:30]
I think that's the key. If you came from there and you were a member of a fairly disciplined group, when you come over here, you carry it over. You, in turn, become that seed, you just attract people and [they] say, "Ha, why [don't] you become our leader. Because in the Philippines it's where you came from. When people know that you come from the UP Madrigal singers, or the UST singers, or the AUP singers, [people say,] "Oh they're so famous, let's try and put our own group here."

Darleen [00:28:26]
It gives you some clout.

Gelo [00:28:27]
Right, it gives you some credibility.

Darleen [00:28:34]
Is there a sense…all of these groups, are they collaborative? Do they know of each other? Is it a close-knit community or is it more fragmented and individual groups?

Gelo [00:28:48]
It's both. It's both to its benefit and otherwise. Because, [in] LA…California people are far apart but when we come together, boy we make serious music and an eating is part of that.

Nilo [00:29:16]
I actually saw Kuya Gelo's group and another alumni of the Philippine Madrigal Singers, he also Formed his group. His name is Mel___? His choir is church-based and they're part of a festival of Asian and Asian American choirs here in LA. It was so amazing to see them together and with the other groups as well and I think there was a group from China who flew in.

Gelo [00:29:44]
Taiwan.

Nilo [00:29:46]
Right. Yes. They can't always sing together because they have their own schedules but when they get together it's an amazing thing.

Gelo [00:29:56]
It's like you've been friends for a long time because you know where everybody came from and and the close-knit feeling of being choir members. It happened to us when we were touring with the UP Madrigal singers. Whenever we meet other choirs abroad, touring at the same time; even though we know that they're rival groups, it's like a big family! We throw rivalry out of the window and we just sing together.

Darleen [00:30:36]
That's a uniquely choral thing, right?

Gelo [00:30:43]
I think so. It's basically we're representing one country and we love to sing and that's all that matters.

Darleen [00:30:55]
Yeah, that's great. That's such a unique thing in choral music. You're both here in America, you're both Philippine-born, but if someone were to ask you…well I will ask you. Would you consider yourself a Filipino artist or Filipino American artists?

Gelo [00:31:15]

Filipino American but trained in the Philippines. I guess that gives us an edge of knowing firsthand the art form and we have access to where it came from. Bringing it here as Filipino Americans, living here for quite some time now, you understand the climate of where you're bringing that art form. I think that's an advantage for me and Nilo as he was talking about the American culture of being private. When it comes to music, I think people open up regardless of race, color, or creed. They're just so receptive and respectful of your art form. Most especially when you're performing a song that came from your native land. They're so receptive of that. They're more critical if you sing something that is from here in America because they'll know if it's authentic or not. They're more respectful, they're more receptive, if it comes from your native land. With regards to Nilo's musical arrangements, that's the testament of people wanting to hear that kind of music. In the Walt Disney Concert Hall, his arrangements sung by the master chorale speaks volumes.

Darleen [00:33:28]
Did you want to add anything to that Nilo?

Nilo [00:33:32]
Yes. For me, I guess I had the privilege of getting education from both from the Philippine perspective and the Western perspective. That's why I, I guess I could merge them. Hopefully well. Of course, bigger chunk of me, like Kuya Gelo, is as well as being born and raised in the Philippines. That will always be there, it's already cemented there. That experience and also education, coupled with the American education that I got. The western exposure that I got, I guess I could say I am both, both in terms of aesthetics now and thinking. But of course, my heart is always a hundred percent Filipino.

Darleen [00:34:31]
Right, right. How does the Filipino American experience- you talked you touched on the privacy and things like that, but how has being a Filipino American here, how has that impacted what you do? Your compositions Nilo, your performances. Versus if you had stayed in the Philippines, how has it impacted your work?

Gelo [00:35:00]
You mean the composition itself.

Darleen [00:35:02]
Yes. Yes.

Nilo [00:35:04]
Well choral music is a Western art form per se. So learning that even in the UP college of music in the Philippines is also a form of learning from the West. I guess the aesthetics would be different. The standard of beauty I guess is very culture specific. In a Western point of view, in Western aesthetic, singing with pure tones, what they call a Bel canto technique or singing [with] well-formed vowels, uniform vowels for each singer in a choir, that's a standard thing.

It's been around for years, hundreds of years, that tradition. In the Philippines, you would find indigenous groups that would have a different vocal production, but totally gorgeous as well. So if an English choir would sing a choral piece by Vaughan Williams or maybe Palestrina, it would sound very even and very pure and very refined. Then we we have groups in the Philippines, tribes that would seem very raw. Very raw and very…how would I describe it? Untouched and unlearned types of vocal production. Which is not wrong but viewed [with]in a Western aesthetic would sound, "Ugh, no that would fit with the Palestrina or with William Byrd kind of piece. Being exposed to both aesthetics, as a composer it was like an explosion of new ideas. How do I combine them? How do I restrict each aesthetic in their own side? How do I respectfully do it? How do we combine them respectfully without disrespecting the original tradition? Which that for me as an artist is very important. You don't bastardize the source of your inspiration. Instead, you pay tribute to that. So that, I guess, is one of the main, not changes, but main effects I guess [on] my composing. The respect for both and the challenge to respectfully combine them. Then the wisdom. I hope I have that. The wisdom to [know] when to keep that one hundred ten percent authentic and when to blend them and when not to do it.

Darleen [00:38:44]
Your music, it has so distinctly, those multiple influences. You can hear it when you listen to it. For Gelo, your group when you perform because I know you don't just perform Tagalog. You perform lots of different music. For both of you, I think Filipinos, in general can very easily appreciate your work on an artistic level. How do you transcend that community? How do you reach other you know other groups, and the rest of America essentially?

Gelo [00:39:30]
For PCSLA, Philippine Chamber Singers, I think it's the other way. When, when you say you're performing for the Filipino community here, how should I say it without being, they're more critical of what you are performing. When you perform in the local American communities, they're more forgiving because you're performing your own music and they appreciate it. Not that I'm saying that the Filipino community doesn't appreciate what you're doing. But I guess you as performers, you have to put on your game face on when you're performing for the Filipino community because they know what you're supposed to be doing. For me, I'm more relaxed performing for a mixed audience but I'm more serious when I'm performing for the Filipino community because you have to really know what you're doing because they know what you're doing. They can be really critical about that.

Darleen [00:41:28]
How do you cope with that criticism?

Gelo [00:41:33]
Well, um, for me it's another opportunity to develop [and] to learn. But some of them are really just, you know, "Oh, I wish you should have you have sung a song from the Visayan region." Or "Why did you not sing this song?" and, "we were expecting it…" I mean, it's not technical but it's more [that] they know that you're Filipino performers and they expect you to sing a song that

coming from their region. Everybody knows that we have seven thousand one hundred islands in the Philippines, and they expect you to sing one song from those items. I think that's about..

Darleen [00:42:28]
We'll be there all year.

Nilo [00:42:32]
They've added more to the number (count) of islands.

Darleen [00:42:38]
More islands.

Gelo [00:42:43]
But it's a challenge. It's a challenge. We welcome that challenge because that's where we learn how to program our concerts, bas[ed] on the audience that we get. For the most part, the audience just likes to reminisce. Talking about the Filipino community, they would like to reminisce. They would like to be brought back to the Philippines without buying a ticket to actually go to the Philippines. That's where we get their attention when we try to program. That's one thing I learned from the UBE magical singers. The programming is actually half of your performance. It's all about programming. It's all about knowing your audience. Sometimes you have to compromise your artistic integrity to perform a karaoke piece and just bring joy to these audience[s]. That's how I program concerts and it works. Most of it, ninety percent, it worked.

Darleen [00:44:23]
It's a very conscious decision then. Knowing, I'm going to perform for a Filipino audience.

Gelo [00:44:29]
Right. I asked for more information. It may be an organization from Bohol, an organization from the Visayas region, from the Mindanao region. We have that here in, in, in LA alone. I think there are a lot of regional organizations here in LA alone and you have to know that. You have to know if they have a special song that's from their region. You have to commission if there's no music for that. That sort of stuff. I mean, the extra…they would know if you if you've done your homework. They would know and they appreciate that (if you do).

Darleen [00:45:21]
Nilo, did you have something to add to that?

Nilo [00:44:25]
What he said is totally true. I mean if the audience knows or is knowledgeable about what you're performing, I guess it's more nerve wracking. I would be the same if a Latvian choir performed here in the US…[vs] would perform in Latvia, it would be the same. They would be like, okay, let's see what we got. I also agree that it's an opportunity to fine tune and to hone one's self. Yeah.

Darleen [00:46:10]
As your work evolves, do you feel any sort of mission or purpose? Cultural mission or cultural purpose as you compose?

Nilo [00:46:24]
Oh, definitely. Even before commissions from international choirs came in. I wanted to represent my country well in anything that I do whether it's composing or singing or just interaction with people. Especially when we were touring with _____.

Nilo [00:46:52]
It was embedded in my mind that they would see me first as this brown-skinned person before they know my name or my culture. Conversations would be a gateway for that. I was always conscious about giving a good name to my country of birth. Of course, that translates to my work as well. I would regard every work of mine with the same regard as how I represent my own myself. Uh, this is not just me. This is everything about me being Filipino, being born there, being raised there, and being educated here in the US. There is a mission to not only make your fellow Filipino proud but to make others see how proud I am of my own culture.

Darleen [00:48:01]
I have just two more questions. Are you okay on time? Okay. Okay, great.

Gelo [00:48:08]
An hour would be great. One more hour [laughter].

Darleen [00:48:16]
Where do you see the future of choral music and the Filipino contribution to choral music? Where do you see that going in the near future or in the future? In general?

Nilo [00:48:32]
Well, with the current situation that we have, I guess more and more groups are turning into virtual collaboration. Of course everyone's hoping that things will go back to normal. We can go back to physical concerts, viewing concerts in person. If the possibility of that is still not yet possible, virtual collaborations is one way to move forward.

Darleen [00:49:12]
Have you done any of that in the last couple of months?

Nilo [00:49:16]
Me? Not personally, but I know groups and the Madrigal singers also did one.

Gelo [00:49:30]
The future of Philippine choral music here in America, I think is thriving and I agree with Nilo with this present situation that we have, although it really is new territory for all performers in general and although everybody's having a hard time coping, I think it's a challenge.

Me, personally, I take it every day, every waking day since the pandemic broke out, I think of ways to [innovate], how to get out there. Basically, yeah, we're stuck with virtual performances.

Nilo [00:50:38]
Hopefully just for now.

Gelo [00:50:40]
For now, for now. To come up with a more [of] that aha moment, for performers, I think this is the norm. Since performing is personal, I've gotten people commenting because I post performances ever since the lockdown began. I mean, not the lockdown, but the shelter in place began. Um, I put up an FB page before I vehemently beat myself [up] because other artists are putting up their FB page as performers. I questioned myself. Why can't I bring myself to put up an FB page? Because there's no reason for it. I get to perform out there. But there's no reason for an FB page. Now, there's a reason for an FB page because you would want to reach people. You would want them to know that you're still alive as a performer.

Gelo [00:52:02]
I think it's a good thing now because if a global reach. You're not constrained here in your community. I guess that's one way of looking at it. It's just that, you know, even if it's virtually, you can reach an audience. (But) how to generate more authentic performances, even if it's virtual because some comment, “There's nothing like a live performance.” There's nothing. Even the greatest choirs in the world, if they show some a song [on] YouTube, it doesn't quite equate to performing it live. The sound quality is different, the lighting is different. How we see it in the screen as opposed to how we see it on stage. I think Eleanor would agree, in dance too, that you can't feel it if it's not there in front of you. Nilo would agree too. You could be watching a 100 inch screen, an orchestra or choir doing [its] work and still fall short. So I think there's a race with performers, how to get that aha moment that. That “Oh, we can do this,” while in shelter in place. I think that's what gets me optimistic as a performer. Yeah, until that time, virtual.

Darleen [00:54:08]
I mean the here's a technical issue too. Like this, right. You have to synchronize, especially in choral music, that's everything.

Nilo [00:54:16]
And as zoom, “live concerts” I guess won't work because of the latency. It doesn't really align very well vertically. So, there is a challenge. Although there could be innovation. I'm thinking as a composer, I can compose music that would not require vertical alignment because it's possible but then [what] about the pieces that require that? But also if we're going to imagine a world

without COVID, I guess choral music is becoming stronger and stronger and stronger in the sense that actually the choral community is very embracing of various cultures. In symposiums, in workshops and in international gatherings of choristers that I've been you will always feel this hunger for each of these groups from different countries. A hunger to know about your music to the extent of performing your music, our music. There's also this sense that cultural organizations are promoting diversity in the programming of university choirs and community choirs. I've heard of funding for initiatives like this to feature not just dead white composers in the programming of choirs but to incorporate music from every culture. There was one Caucasian American, a conductor, [at] one of the universities here in LA who featured all Filipino music for the whole semester. That was just, wow for me. I was so thankful for doing that. I'm pretty sure there are a lot of first-time hearers of Filipino work and that's a really good thing. In the choral world there are no racists, I guess. So, I love it. I love the choral …(voice faded)

Gelo [00:57:11]
If I may interject with Nilo. If there came a time that [there was] an international choral competition or festival, if they knew that there's a Filipino choir in the competition or in the program, they would really step up their game because Filipino choral groups have been sowing the respect of international choral community that we gain that status because of their hard work. They really put work into it. The enthusiasm of each choir singers, I think that's the edge. Even though these are high school students or college students-whenever they go into rehearsals-a hundred percent. Even though they haven't done their homework yet. Choir practice, I'm there. So, they're really serious about their choral music and that for us, the future looks bright for Filipino choral music because of people like Nilo. He does really beautiful arrangements.

Nilo [00:58:49]
Thank you.

Gelo [00:58:53]
I think he has mastered the levels. Easy, intermediate, and hard.

Darleen [00:59:04]
He challenged all the levels.

Gelo [00:59:06]
Exactly and there's an arrangement of Nilo for every level of choir and that's fantastic.

Darleen [00:59:19]
My last question is what advice do you have for someone who might want to follow in your footsteps or do what you do?

Gelo [00:59:32]
Okay. I would say lucky for you because people before me have paved the way and I'm just continuing the paving and it's an unending obstacle course. With regards to choral music, I think

we've contributed to where it is right now. We're seeing the younger generation get into it in the Filipino American community and even in the American mainstream community. They hunger for new music, not only the classics. They look forward to new arrangements. That's why Nilo is thriving. They look forward to new compositions and they look forward to the challenge. I think you just have to continue on, be innovative, be creative in programming. If you're a choir director, explore. Don't be safe. Explore. If you perform and the crowd doesn't like it, there [will be] an improvement next time. Most especially, don't quit. Don't quit. If it feels hard, you have to make a living. That's the number one reason why you immigrated here in the US is because you you want to make a good living but if the stress gets [to] you just remember to look back [at]why you established this choral group. It's because of the music, making music together. Enjoy it. All will be.

Nilo [01:02:06]
For me, I can think of three aspects. The one is no one is looking forward. The second one is like living in the now. The third one is like looking back. Going forward for me means investing in yourself. Foreseeing what could be done to achieve what you envision yourself to be in the future. What steps can you do to enhance your skill. Not just the skills. Work on yourself, work on your spirituality, work on your mental health, work on your physical health. I mean that encompasses everything an artist should be. Music making is not just music making per se.
It's what you read, what you eat, what you ingest. So [be] careful what you ingest as well. They say you are the average of the five people, I guess, you spent more time with. That does not just apply to people that you hang out with in person. It's like what, what you read what you see on TV. I guess it boils down to enriching yourself to become a better artist that would have something enriching to say.

Nilo [01:03:40]
The second one living in the now. I try to celebrate every single step of my journey. I do not take for granted any accomplishment or anything that I've done. I celebrate that but I don't hold onto that as if, “Oh, this is it. I've made it.” So, it's live in the now but look forward. Looking to the past like what [is created] out of sand. Acknowledging people that came before you. A lot of Filipino composers came before me and I acknowledge them for opening doors for me and for opening up my mind to their sounds, their thinking, their music. I guess that's it.

Darleen [01:04:38]
Well, thank you so much. That was pretty much all of my questions, but I don't know, is there anything else you that maybe I didn't ask you about that you want to add? Eleanor, do you have a question for them?

Eleanor [01:04:53]
I just wanted to take a moment to slip in my praise. You both have very different trajectories and career paths, but the thing I see in common with both, [which is] why I thought of you in the conversation together, is that a) you're both very diverse. The diversity of repertoire that you dive into and with mastery, from the classics to the American Idol style pop music with just as much

enthusiasm is really wonderful. And you're both doers, you say you have this divine blessing, intervention, being in the right place at the right time. Yes, but you're very take charge, hardworking doers who are doing things for the art, for our community and making things happen. In the last two years, I've been blessed to sit in the audience and see each of you grace the stage at Disney Hall and I just sat there and I had tears streaming down my face when watching and witnessing the beauty of your work and of the singers that you work with. So, thank you for being so inspirational and Darleen is just such a great interviewer that I actually don't have any further questions to add. You covered everything that I was wondering.

Gelo [01:06:25]
I think we forgot one. What [do] we eat after rehearsals.

Eleanor [01:06:44]
Not too much dairy, don't want to muck up the vocal cords?

Gelo [01:06:45]
Food plays a great part, in our culture, of course food. After rehearsal there's food and after performances there's food. Can't be Filipino without food.

Darleen [01:07:04]
It builds community as well; to be able to share a meal together. There's nothing better than that. Did you have any lasting thoughts before we close out?

Gelo [01:07:22]
Thank you for having us. Honestly, I didn't [know] what [would] happen. Uh, I didn't [know]what the interview was all about. All I know is there's an ebook coming out and you want to pick our brains. I am thankful for giving us a voice. Not a lot of people appreciate the work that we do. Instead we get criticisms for why we do it and the manner in which we do it. I'm grateful. If this is going to be there in cyberspace, thank you for putting a voice into what we do and just be heard.

Nilo [01:08:41]
Yes. Thank you. Thank you for having us. I don't always have this opportunity to share my story or our journeys. So, Eleanor especially, thank you. Thank you. Thinking of this, maybe in the future we could also have another zoom session and brainstorm what projects we can do together or what ideas we can do for the community for the Fil-Am arts community. For us to move forward together.

Gelo [01:09:19]
In these times.

Nilo [01:09:21]

Yeah. Maybe one thing we can address is how to educate non-Filipinos about our culture. How to bridge the gap between the Pinoy-born and the US-born Filipinos in terms of knowledge in our own culture. I'm not saying that US born Filipinos are less knowledgeable. In fact, Eleanor is so much more Filipino than I am. I guess. In terms of knowledge about our culture. There's so many ideas popping into my mind. Maybe we could have a database of Filipino works or a database of Filipino performers. I guess. Things like that. Maybe we could schedule that in another in another session.

Darleen [01:10:23]
That would be amazing, I think. This is a good start in conversations.

Eleanor [01:10:30]
Well, we do have an opportunity because the materials that [are] going into the digital database for this book project, they will be made available online. So, if you would like to add anything. Any videos or photos to give a sampling of your work, I am expecting them just for the next few days. We have to package them and get them to the California Revealed Archive for processing. Even though it's digital. All we need is for you to fill out the UC deed of gift form that formally gifts this and gives permission to the UCLA ethnomusicology archive to include it in this collection. It was one of those PDFs I included. So, there's an opportunity, but I need it soon.

Nilo [01:11:22]
So you prefer a digital instead of physical?

Eleanor [01:11:27]
In the future, there will be opportunities for physical objects such as VHS, but for now the physical collection is already in process for this phase and we're only able to take a few more final digital pieces. All the information [must be] passed along before June 1st. So, we're kind of in the last push.

Gelo [01:11:53]
Could be photographs, right?

Eleanor [01:11:56]
Yes. As long as it's digital, we're good with description.

Nilo [01:12:03]
Where will this be available and how can people access this?

Eleanor [01:12:08]
The current collection that we're building, to go along with this ebook is called the Ube Arte collection. Ube Arte is our research organization that we formed [with me], Dr. Mary Talusan, Dr. Bernard Ellorin, Peter Paul DeGuzman, Marlo Campos. This is our organization. And this is [a kind of] deposit that we're on the tail end of donating,

Nilo [01:12:39]
Very distinguished Filipino Americans I would say.

Eleanor [01:12:43]
Thank you. Well, we're very grateful to California Revealed. California Revealed is an initiative of the California state library to take these community collections and make them available online as a resource. Unlike Google or YouTube links, all these links that break and die very quickly, these should stay stable for a very long time. Hopefully, someone will find this ebook 10 years from now and find that all the links and all the references there are still as alive as the day we put them in.

Gelo [01:13:38]
It's like StoryCorp. One more thing, my hope and my dream apex is to have a Philippine performing center physical building, where all Filipinos fall. Filipino Americans can do a performance. Hey, if some [other] states can do it, we can do it.

Nilo [01:13:44]
There's one in Florida.

Gelo [01:13:45]
Tampa.

Nilo [01:13:51]
I think the person involved there is also…

Gelo [01:13:54]
An alumnus of Bayanihan dancers. I'm proud to have contributed with my two other groups before. They were raising funds to build that center and we were one of the artists that performed in their fundraising.

Nilo [01:14:15]
So hopefully LA will have its own.

Gelo [01:14:18]
Yes please. We have to have a home

Darleen [01:14:22]
We just need to talk about it to everybody.

Gelo [01:14:26]
Exactly. I mean, what I said it has, we have to get it out there and it'll happen. It'll happen. Thank you.

Darleen [01:14:34]
Thank you so much. It was such a joy talking with you both and meeting you virtually. Hopefully one day I get to meet you in person.

Gelo [01:14:47]
Over a meal.

Darleen [01:14:50]
Yes. Potluck.

Nilo [01:14:53]
Potluck and halo-halo

Gelo [01:14:55]
Yeah. I'll host the boodle fight.

Darleen [01:14:59]
My favorite.

Eleanor [01:15:00]
You're making me hungry

Gelo [01:15:03]
That's my son over there.

Eleanor [01:15:08]
We'll all bring the kids. They'll run around.

Gelo [01:15:13]
Thank you, Eleanor, thank you Darleen. Thank you Nilo.

Eleanor [01:15:16]
Thank you. Happy Memorial Day. Whatever that means in this situation. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Darleen [01:15:23]
Have a good week.

Gelo [01:15:23]
You too.

Eleanor [01:15:26]

Bye. [end]

KEYWORDS

PEOPLE
Billy Joel
Grant Gershon (Artistic Director, LA Master Chorale)
Mel ? - director of church-based choir at Asian Choir Festival in L.A.
Vaughan Williams
Palestrina
William Byrd

PLACES
Granada Hills
Mandaluyong
St. John Baptist Church, Granada Hills
Syracuse University
UP College of Music, "The U.P."
Visayan region
Bohol
Mindanao
Latvia

GROUPS
Philippine Madrigal Singers of the University of the Philippines, Diliman / UP Madrigal Singers
UP LB Choral Ensemble of UP Los Baños
Polyphonic Society of Mandaluyong
Philippine Chamber Singers Los Angeles
Philippine Consulate General
UST Singers Alumni (University of Santo Tomas)
Adventist University of the Philippines Alumni/AUP Singers
Bayanihan Dance Company

OTHER TERMS
Titos and Titas ("Uncles and Aunties")
Choristers
Paco Park Presents (sp?) - Philippine TV show
Kuya = older brother, (Nilo calls him "Kuya Gelo")
KBL Singers = Kasal Binyag Libing = Wedding Baptism Funeral singers
Bel canto technique
FB page = Facebook page
Halo Halo - Philippine shaved ice dessert

Boodle Fight (eating Filipino food by hand off of banana leaves)

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